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## **The Wild Hunt in the Modern British Imagination**

### ***Abstract***

The expression ‘Wild Hunt’ has acted as a shorthand one in Western culture for nocturnal cavalcades of spirits, usually with a recognised leader, ever since it was coined by the German scholar Jacob Grimm in the early nineteenth century. For a short period in the late twentieth century it was a major motif in British fiction, and especially in novels designed for children and young adults. This article is intended to explore the links between the two phenomena, of the status of the concept in wider culture and of its use in fantasy literature, and in the process to further an understanding of the relationship between folklore, scholarship and creative writing in Britain during the past two hundred years.

### ***Introduction***

In 2001 Hilda Ellis Davidson, one of the leading British experts in folklore and in medieval European mythology, defined the Wild Hunt as ‘one of many names for a company of dark riders who pass through the sky at night, or else along lonely roads’. She added that its leaders could be supernatural or legendary figures, or historical personalities, and that it was usually regarded as sinister and menacing: ‘an impressive example of the intrusion of dangerous Otherworld powers into daily life’ (Davidson 2001, 163). In the same year (and the same volume), another leading folklorist, Patricia Lysaght, provided a wholly compatible and even more economical definition of the Hunt as ‘a group of ghostly hunters (horsemen) riding through the sky at night’ (Lysaght 2001, 177). These two complementary characterizations accurately summed up the usage of the term which had prevailed through the twentieth century among scholars of folklore and cultural history. What was especially significant about the developing employment of the concept of the Wild Hunt, by the end of that century, was the major role which it had come to play in the popular imagination. In particular, it had achieved a prominent place in British works of fiction, and especially among those designed for children and young adults. Catherine (then Charles) Butler, who has made the pioneering study of this development, has aptly described it as ‘paradigmatic of the way in which mythological and folk material has been utilised within British children’s fantasy’ (Butler 2006, 184).

Butler’s has been one of a small number of good pieces of recent scholarship which have concerned themes related to the history of the motif since it emerged in the

nineteenth century, and of its earlier folkloric roots. There is still room, however, for a broader overview of its modern evolution, which could function as an illustration of the manner in which folklore, scholarship and creative literature may interact to generate beliefs and concepts within popular culture. Such an overview is the subject of this article.

### ***Grimm's Model and the British Context***

The name 'The Wild Hunt', as used for these spectral cavalcades, was coined and popularized in the early nineteenth century by the leading German scholar Jacob Grimm, who drew extensively on records of contemporary folklore, mostly German, which he combined with medieval and ancient texts to assemble his construct. This depended on the argument that all of the disparate evidence which he had assembled had descended from a single and primordial pagan belief, once found across northern Europe, in a nocturnal ride of the heroic dead, led by a god whom he identified principally with the Germanic Wotan, Anglo-Saxon Woden or Norse Odin, and that god's consort, a goddess of fertility (Grimm 1882, 1:267-88 and 3: 918-52). It has recently been suggested that Grimm assembled his portrait of the Hunt from three different, and originally unrelated, popular traditions, which had appeared in the early to high Middle Ages (Hutton 2014). The first of these was a belief in night-time rides by a group of spirits, usually female and often led by a superhuman female, commonly known as Diana, Herodias, Holle or Holda, Bertha or Percht, but also by

many local names and often just as 'the Lady'. These roamed the world, frequently visited the homes of favoured humans, and as frequently included other favoured living people in their company. The second was a concept of a nocturnal procession of penitential human dead, or of demons impersonating them. The individuals represented in it were often those who had met violent, premature or sinful ends, and the group was commonly spoken of as having a male leader, called Herlechin, Herlewin or Hellequin, though he almost never actually appeared with them. The third was a tradition of individual spectral huntsmen, riding at night with a ghostly pack of hounds. The hunter concerned could be variously the Devil, pursuing sinners or their souls; a former human huntsman, doomed to wander the dark hours to pay for sins during life; or a wild man who pursued otherworldly prey, and sometimes took the livestock of humans as well. It was the individual spectral hunter who was known in some stories as 'The Wild Huntsman', and Grimm appropriated and modified this term for his much larger composite concept.

Allowing that the three component parts of Grimm's construct do seem to have some individual identity, it is noteworthy that the richness of their presence in the Germanic folklore on which he drew most heavily is not paralleled in Britain. There are no precise local equivalents here of the night-roaming ladies and their entourage. By early modern times it had become widely accepted that the folk magicians, now commonly called cunning folk by scholars, often resorted to the fairies to gain their knowledge, and that - especially in Scotland - they had relationships with fairy monarchs, above all the queen (Thomas 1971, 608-9; Henderson and Cowan 2001,

74-141; Goodare 2015). Joining them for night rides and revels, however, was not a central part of those relationships. The Herlechin tradition fares slightly better, because towards the end of the twelfth century Walter Map referred to stories of night-roaming spirits or ghosts as current in England. In particular he repeats one of an ancient British king called Herla, doomed to roam with his mounted retinue for centuries because of a curse put on them by a demon. This was clearly intended to explain the name of the tradition, and Map located it specifically in the Wye Valley region (Map 1983, bk 4, chap. 13). That particular tale remains however completely anomalous, while no subsequent medieval writer recorded any about nocturnal spirit troops in England, and so there is no way of determining if any genuine popular tradition lay behind his references. Likewise, the Herlechin host was known to the authors of two fourteenth-century English poems, *A Tale of Beryn* (which may have been by Chaucer) and *Mum and the Soothsegg*, as a proverbial trope, but it is not clear if they had encountered it only in Continental sources (Meisen 1935, 128; Lecouteux 2011, 183). There is a stray reference to the repeated sighting of demonic hunters near Peterborough Abbey in 1127, riding through the night on black steeds with black hounds. This was, however, recorded as a one-off event, clearly intended as an evil omen to embarrass a new and unpopular abbot (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 258). In addition, both of these first two of the component parts of Grimm's construct seem to be missing from the early modern British poems, plays and court records which represent such a rich source of information for the folklorist.

There is however one element of British folklore, shared with many other parts of Europe, which predates Grimm's work, plugs directly into the third source of inspiration for it, that of the solitary phantom hunter, and is recorded widely throughout the island. This is the belief in supernatural packs of dogs which passed through the sky at night, baying, and represented a portent of misfortune, and often of death, to people who heard them. Sometimes they were said to chase the souls of wicked individuals or unbaptized babies, who had just expired. The wide distribution of the motif must reflect its derivation from a common form of actual experience, perhaps of the howling of the wind or the cries of migrating wildfowl, and especially of the brean goose which flies in flocks through the darkness with yelping sounds (an identification popular with Victorian scholars such as Sabine Baring-Gould, William Henderson and Thomas Wright). At any rate, these spectral packs were known in Devon and Somerset as Whisht (Melancholy), Yell (Yelling) or Yeth (Heath) Hounds, in the North of England and North Midlands as Gabriel Hounds or Gabriel Ratchets (also meaning dogs), in Worcestershire as the Seven Whistlers, in Sussex as Wish or Witch Hounds, on the Welsh Border as Hell Hounds, and in West Wales as the *cwn annwn* (otherworld or hell hounds) (Henderson 1879, 129-31; Tozer 1873, 94; Sykes 1880, 233-5; Baring-Gould 1899, 1: 183-4; Wright 1900, 530; Lewes 1907, 90; Simpson 1973, 50; Palmer 1976; Simpson 1976, 34; Brown 1979, 36-8; Westwood 1985, 155-7).

In some regions this belief was combined with a related one that a demonic or damned huntsman accompanied the hounds, or more occasionally a particular damned

human was their quarry. This was especially strong in the South-West, from the Quantock and Blackdown Hills to Land's End, where the figure concerned was identified either as Satan or as an early modern local character, sometimes a hero like Sir Francis Drake but more often a squire or magistrate hated for oppressive and predatory ways, such as Jan Tregeagle, Sir Robert Chichester or Richard Capel (Bottrell 1873, 66; Hunt 1916, 145, 223-4; Matthews 1923, 80-1; Palmer 1976, 79; Whitlock 1977; Brown 1979, 35-7; Westwood 1985, 156-7; The deeds and character with which these personalities were charged in the folklore concerned were sufficiently far from the historic truth of each to suggest that these legends, recorded from the nineteenth century, had been some time in the making. There is some trace of an accompanying huntsman with the nocturnal hounds in Sussex, where a horn was often heard together with their howls at Ditchling Beacon (Simpson 1973, 50), but this tradition is not recorded in the Midlands and North.

The evidence for Wales is contradictory: in 1880 Wirt Sikes stated categorically that the motif of the supernatural huntsman was unknown there among ordinary people, but in 1901 Sir John Rhys stated as confidently that he was, and was moreover identified as Gwyn ap Nudd, a character prominent in late medieval Welsh literature as the lord of the underworld or otherworld, often with distinctly demonic overtones (Sykes 1880, 235-6; Rhys 1901, 1: 143-4, 215-16, 203). If this were a continuous survival of tradition from the Middle Ages, it would be very significant, and this is very much what Rhys implied, while putting forward his own theory that Gwyn had been a pagan god of winter, death and darkness (Rhys 1891, 36, 69, 260: see Foster



1953 and Rüdiger 2012 for critiques of this theory). Sikes, however, sounded a cautionary note, observing that by his time the *cwn annwn* were commonly identified in South Wales with the dogs of Arawn, king of Annwn or the otherworld, who was a major character in the medieval Welsh tale of Pwyll. He also made clear, however, that this identification was derived from the huge recent popularity of modern printed editions of the story, which were now read across the region. Angelika Rüdiger has likewise concluded that there is no trace of Gwyn in Welsh folk culture between the end of the Middle Ages and the revival of interest in medieval Welsh texts, and its popular impact, in the nineteenth century (Rüdiger 2012). Wales did, however, produce its own home-grown companion of the *cwn annwn* before Rhys wrote: a sorceress called Mallt-y-Nos (Matilda of the Night). She first appears in a poem by Taliesin Williams in 1837, hunting the soul of an executed pirate with ‘Annwn’s gaunt hounds’ (Williams 1837, 69-73). Thereafter she became a figure, with the spectral hounds, in Welsh literary tradition (Aaron 2013, 164-9), and by the end of the century was apparently part of the folklore of Williams’ Glamorgan, with a back-story provided to explain her role (Trevelyan 1909, 49). How much earlier she was known than the time of Williams, and whether she derived ultimately from a genuine popular tradition, seem, however, to be very difficult questions to answer.

Indeed, the antiquity of the whole tradition of ghostly nocturnal hunts, with or without an accompanying huntsman, is surprisingly hard to determine. On the one hand, the broad distribution of beliefs in roving packs of supernatural dogs, and of the natural phenomena in which they are probably anchored, argue for a very old

provenance. Moreover, the motif of the ghostly hunter, doomed because of his misdeeds to carry on his sport or be the object of it, night after night, is both worldwide and ancient, being known not only across Europe but among the Iroquois and Malays and in the Vedic Hymns (Binnall 1935). It was certainly established in Britain by 1807, when William Wordsworth published his ‘Miscellaneous Sonnet 29’, which contained the lines

‘For overhead are sweeping Gabriel’s Hounds  
Doomed with their impious Lord, the flying Hart,  
To chase for ever, on aerial grounds!’

However, medieval and early modern references to it seem curiously hard to find. John Aubrey reported hounds being heard (and less commonly seen) in the air near Blunsdon, North Wiltshire, in the seventeenth century; but as a remarkable single event, like the demonic hunt near Peterborough, and not as part of a tradition (Westwood 1985, 155). On the other hand, the northern Gabriel Ratchets are definitely attested in the middle of that century, as a long-established belief, by the nonconformist minister Oliver Heywood. Writing of his local area, near Halifax, he recorded that in the winter of 1664-5 many heard a strange noise in the air, ‘as if a great number of whelps were barking and howling’. The country people called it ‘Gabriel-Ratches’, and believed it both to cause the deaths of those who heard it and to warn of famine and plague to come. They distinguished it from another weird noise heard in the same winter, which Heywood compared to a piece of wood carried

violently through the air, and which they termed the ‘night-whistlers’ (Heywood 1883, vol, 3, 91). It is the motif of the ghostly huntsman which seems to be missing in this earlier period.

The famous medieval examples of that are Continental, and especially German (Lecouteux 2011, 56-84). It certainly swept British literary society in the decade before Wordsworth wrote his poem, but that was because of the impact of the poetic tales of the German writer Gottfried August Bürger, which were translated into English at that time. They were much read by the British poets and novelists of Wordsworth’s generation, and the one on ‘Der Wilde Jäger’ (The Wild Huntsman’), a classic story of a sinful huntsman doomed to be hunted forever by Satan by night, was especially popular: it was translated again by Sir Walter Scott (Hoeveler 2010, 164-5). There is also some indication that the motif grew in local popularity in the course of the nineteenth century: no account of Dartmoor folklore was complete without a reference to a spectral hunt from the 1860s onward (Kelly 1863, 266-91; Tozer 1873; Baring-Gould 1899, 1: 183-4; Hunt 1916, 145; St Leger-Gordon 1965, 26-7), but a generation earlier Anna Bray’s careful account of the folklore of the western part of the moor was barren of any (Bray 1836).

### ***Grimm’s Impact: Upon Folklorists***

Grimm's construct of the Wild Hunt, and his hypothetical account of its origins, had a marked impact upon British scholars, was also marked, but it was both selective and delayed. It really became apparent in the mid-nineteenth century, and – naturally enough – mainly upon authors who were interested in German and Scandinavian folklore, and in general theories of popular belief. When Benjamin Thorpe brought out his collection of Scandinavian and North German legends in 1851, he adopted Grimm's term 'The Wild Hunt' for the theme of the solitary ghostly huntsman, but not the rest of the associations which Grimm had packed into it (Thorpe 1851, 2: 195-202). By contrast George Webb Dasent, publishing his translation of Norse folk tales two years later, summarized the whole of Grimm's construct, including his conjectural ancient ur-myth, as proven fact (Dasent 1904, ciii-cvii). In 1863 that construct was accepted by both Sabine Baring-Gould, introducing Icelandic culture to a British readership, and Walter Kelly, performing the same office for the fruits of recent German scholarship (Sabine-Gould 1863, 199-203; Kelly, 266-91). Kelly imposed it upon English stories, declaring the Wish Hounds of Dartmoor to have derived their name from their original master, Woden. Sabine-Gould's endorsement encouraged William Henderson to apply it to the Gabriel Hounds in his study of popular beliefs and customs in northern England, one of the first great products of the new British interest in folklore (Henderson, 131).

Two decades later, it entered another distinguished local collection, that of Charlotte Burne for Shropshire (Burne 1883, 25-32). She dealt with the legend of Wild Edric, a historic local rebel against the Norman conquest of England. The basic tradition

which she collected was from miners, who reported that Edric and his followers now inhabited the interior of hills, and were credited with the knocking noises in mines which the men working them more usually attributed to subterranean spirits.

Whenever England was about to go to war, however, they were said to emerge and ride across the country, an act attributed both to their readiness to aid their nation when it was in dire need and to a penance for their historic submission to the Normans. It was this latter explanation which linked in with a strand of Grimm's construct, that of the penitential dead, and caused Burne to associate with his Wild Hunt what was otherwise a rather standard waiting-hero legend, with a subset concerning rides across the surface of the land, and not necessarily at night. Her enthusiasm for the linkage was increased when one young woman claimed to have seen Edric and his retinue as a child, accompanied by a new character in the story, Edric's golden-haired wife, Lady Godda. The name Godda, Burne believed, echoed that of one of the German spectral hunters in Grimm's book, Frau Gode. Whether the similarity was not in fact coincidence, and if not whether it derived from a primeval sub-stratum of popular memory, or from the fact that the young woman concerned had been told the German story popularized by Grimm, may never be known. At any rate it justified Burne in deciding that Edric had once been a pagan storm god, of Woden's sort.

In general, however, the authors of local folklore collections, during the golden age of the genre in the period between 1870 and 1930, made no reference to the term 'Wild Hunt' or the ideological baggage which Grimm had loaded onto it. This

remained the case through the rest of the early twentieth century, with rare exceptions represented by individual enthusiasts. One such was Peter Binnall in 1935, who made a rather strained attempt to argue that an idiosyncratic former custom at Caistor, Lincolnshire, of cracking a whip in the church porch each Palm Sunday, represented a survival of an ancient offering to Odin. He glossed the latter by describing him as being ‘of course’ the storm god who lay behind the figure of the Wild Huntsman which accompanied the ghostly hounds of British folklore (Binnall 1935). His employment of Grimm’s model did, however, become common practice among folklorists in the later part of the century, and especially in the period from 1965 to 1985, which was another boom one for the publication of local collections of folklore, although now based mainly on material recorded much earlier. Sometimes the authors of these accepted aspects of the model as proven— for example, that all spectral hunters in Britain were former pagan gods (e.g. St Leger-Gordon, 1965, 26-7). More often they referred to phenomena such as spectral huntsmen or horsemen as ‘the Wild Hunt’, without further apparent need for elucidation (Whitlock 1977, 19, 26-7; Palmer, 1976, 76-7; Simpson, 1976, 34).

Occasionally they briefly discussed the ascription of such phenomena to that category. Theo Brown speculated that the supernatural or ghostly hunters and hounds of Devon and Cornwall, and their quarry, could derive from ‘the Wild Hunt of Odin’, but thought it more probable that they descended instead from a Celtic tradition, such as that of the hounds of Arawn, or the legendary hunt of Arthur and his band for the great boar Twrch Tywyth in the medieval Welsh tale of Culhwch and Olwen (Brown

1979, 37-8). Jennifer Westwood called the manifestation of ghost hounds ‘an aspect’ of the Wild Hunt, with their leader ‘an aspect’ of Woden, and mentioned that the same apparitions were known in Germany. She added that they were also called ‘Herlathingus’, using Walter Map’s name for the retinue of the mythical king Herla (Westwood 1985, 156-7). None of these writers, however, attempted to define the Wild Hunt with any precision or to examine the concept. It was simply treated as a useful umbrella term, the nature of which readers would now instinctively understand without further attention being paid to it. Much the same attitude has endured since. In 2001 Hilda Ellis Davidson and Patricia Lysaght did take care to define the expression, with the results quoted earlier; but no British folklorists seem to have looked further at it to examine its nature, provenance or suitability for purpose. Since the 1960s it has become the norm to employ it unthinkingly as a shorthand in folklore studies for ghostly or superhuman riders operating at night, with or without dogs and with or without the explicit activity of a hunt. The utility of a term which thus unites such very disparate phenomena as though they are parts of a single coherent category may perhaps now be reconsidered.

### ***Grimm’s Impact: Upon Creative Literature***

Even more than in the case of works upon folklore, the widespread adoption of Grimm’s model by authors of fiction was to be a long-delayed process, though with one dramatic exception: an immediate and spectacular employment of Grimm’s ideas

by one Victorian novelist which predated and overshadowed those made by folklorists. The writer concerned was William Harrison Ainsworth, and the story *Windsor Castle*, which was published as a book in 1843 after serialization in a magazine. It was a melodrama set in the reign of Henry VIII, and in and around the castle, and most charismatic and memorable character in it was Herne the Hunter, taken of course from William Shakespeare's play *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (Act 4, Scene 4, lines 28-41). Shakespeare had made Herne a ghost, of a gamekeeper in the royal forest of Windsor, who appeared in the middle of winter nights around a blasted oak tree, wearing 'great ragged horns', which are later specified (in the scene direction for Act 5, Scene 5) as those of a stag. As a spirit, he was decidedly evil, causing illness and death in livestock and making cows yield blood rather than milk. His antlers could signify either his bestial nature or a mocking punishment of him for misdeeds in life. Shakespeare cannily allowed Herne's possible nature to be comprehended within two different traditions, a medieval one of the undead corpses of evil-doers as sources of affliction for the living, and a Protestant one of apparent ghosts as actually being demons who took the form of dead humans; furthermore, he also allowed room for a third viewpoint of outright scepticism, by making the speaker who informed the company of the story dismiss it as a superstitious fable (cf. Marshall 2002). No prior mention of Herne the Hunter has been found to that in Shakespeare, who might have invented him, or might have been citing an existing Windsor legend.

Ainsworth's connection of Herne with Grimm's Wild Hunt was provided by Grimm himself, in an almost throwaway line in which he suggested that Herne the Hunter



may have been the English version of the pagan god who had led the Hunt in Grimm's imagining of the primordial myth behind all northern European traditions of nocturnal spirit-rides (Grimm 1882, 3:942). The ghostly Herne did not ride anything in Shakespeare's play, and did not have accompanying dogs, or a retinue, and indeed did not hunt; and so it seems to have been his name and nocturnal nature alone which drew Grimm's attention. At any rate, Ainsworth's version of him turned out to be a blend of Shakespeare's and Grimm's. Indeed, his Herne had both of the possible contemporary readings of the playwright's creation, being allegedly the ghost of a human being but also clearly now demonic, being accompanied by imps and making pacts with humans to grant their desires in return for their souls. He also, however, now rode a fire-breathing black horse, with black dogs running beside him, and led a cavalcade of followers who – in the manner of the various traditions on which Grimm drew for his composite construct – included both dead humans, especially executed felons, and living humans who had given him fealty. Jeremy Harte, the historian of the legend of Herne, has shown how Ainsworth even took small details such as the owl which flies in front of the demonic huntsman from the German tales recounted by Grimm (Harte 1996, 31).

Ainsworth's novel was, like most of what he wrote, a terrific success, and in fact remained in print until the 1960s. However, perhaps because his Herne was such a successful, and celebrated, character, he found no direct imitators. Neither the Wild Hunt nor Herne the Hunter became popular subjects for writers, whether in poems, plays or novels, in the ensuing hundred years, despite the taste of much of that period

for the uncanny, and the use of folkloric motifs by some novelists. One of those novelists, Mary Webb, did use the figure of the ghostly nocturnal hunter as a symbolic background presence in one of her less well-known stories, *Gone to Earth*, published in 1917. There a local legend of a Black Huntsman and his ‘death pack’ is made a fictional counterpart to the real squire who is the villain of the plot – ruthless, rapacious and predatory – and hunting is made into an activity representative of universal human cruelty. Even in Webb, however, there is no direct reference to the collective Wild Hunt of Grimm, or indeed to the expression ‘Wild Hunt’, at all. When John Masefield brought Herne into a children’s story in 1935, he reinvented him as a benevolent spirit of nature, a Lord of the Animals, understanding and protecting the creatures of the wildwood and explaining their ways to the young hero. His Herne did not have a horse, dogs or an entourage: he was simply Shakespeare’s character with a kindly green makeover (Masefield 2008, 105-9). In the 1930s, also, Margaret Murray suggested that Herne had been the English name for the horned nature-god whom she made the main male deity of her imagined medieval and early modern pagan witch religion (Murray 1952, 34, 38). As Jeremy Harte has noted, what she took to be the historical details of the legend were actually derived from Ainsworth’s novel (Harte 1996, 32). None the less, she made no reference to him as leader of a hunt, or of any other kind of retinue.

Likewise, trappings of the Wild Hunt could appear in other contexts. For example, in 1944 the author of a children’s story set in a fairy-tale Scotland included a troop of ghostly riders led by a King Eochaid, based on one in the anecdotes of the medieval

writer Gervase of Tilbury and part of the high medieval tradition of the wandering dead or undead (Dickinson 1944). In another children's book, *The River at Green Knowe*, Lucy Boston could introduce a group of phantom human figures dancing under the full moon clad in deer's skins, their leader sporting a stag's antlers.

However, they also wear necklaces of animals' tusks, horns and teeth and paint upon their faces and hands; do not ride; and are never called the Wild Hunt (Boston 1959, 91-95). They are in fact identified firmly as the spirits of prehistoric ('Stone Age') hunters, and their costume may well have been inspired by reports of the excavation of the famous British Mesolithic site of Star Carr, earlier in that decade, with its discovery of headdresses made of deer's antlers and skull caps (Clark 1954).

When Robert Graves came to summarize what he took to be the Wild Hunt tradition in his idiosyncratic set of reflections upon poetry and mythology, *The White Goddess*, in 1948, it was as a compendium of different images and associations, evolved from that of Grimm with a fair amount of Sir John Rhys stirred in. He described the ghostly hounds under their various local English and Welsh names, and remarked that the Hunter was variously called Gwyn, Herne or Gabriel. He then ventured the opinion that his original British name was Bran or Vron, and that he had been god of the underworld. Gwyn, however, he took to be the most interesting of the divine figures to descend from Bran, the guide of souls to the land of the dead in Graves's reconstructed pagan Welsh myth, and the winter form of the god who represented the cycle of seasons: 'leader of the autumnal Wild Chase ... Gwyn the white rider on the pale horse, leading his white, red-eared pack' (derived from that of Arawn) (Graves

1961, 89, 321). Graves himself, however, did not put Gwyn or any other version of the Hunter into one of his own poems or novels. It looks at this point as if where creative writing was concerned Grimm's characterization of the Wild Hunt had produced one spectacular flash in the pan, in the shape of *Windsor Castle*, and then nothing much more. To stretch the metaphor, however, it had actually been a very slow-burning fuse, and there was about to be an explosion.

### ***The Era of the Wild Hunt in British Fiction***

The appearance of the Wild Hunt as a major theme in British novels was both a sudden and a tightly bounded one, spanning most of the 1960s and 1970s and so matching, in a manner which can hardly be coincidental, the period of its apogee among folklorists. Equally noteworthy is that it was a phenomenon confined to fiction designed for children and young adults, which is not surprising, as that was the genre in which fantasy drawing on older mythology, folklore and imaginative literature was most pronounced. It commenced dramatically in 1963 with the appearance of Alan Garner's *The Moon of Gomrath*, a tale of children mixed up in a contest between essentially good and evil forces, including wizards, witches, elves, dwarfs and many other kinds of fantastic being, set in rural East Cheshire. The Hunt features in this as part of a third force, the Old Magic, a more primeval and amoral source of power embedded in the natural world, which has long lain dormant until the children reawaken it. It represents 'the heart of all wild things. Here were thunder, lightning,

storm; the slow beat of tides and seasons, birth and death, the need to kill and the need to make.’ (Garner 1974, 79). As such it is too unpredictable and unrestrained to be compatible with modernity, and must either be subdued or allowed to depart.

In his usual manner of uninhibited mythological eclecticism, Garner rang the changes on the different traditions which Grimm and Graves had combined in their models. His Wild Hunt went by that actual name in the book, but was also called the Einheriar, after the select body of slain warriors chosen by Odin in Norse myth, and the Herlathing, Walter Map’s name for the medieval hosts of roving dead or undead soldiers. Its fourth name was the Horsemen of Donn, echoing a semi-divine ancestor in medieval Welsh wonder-tales, and a possible god of the dead in Irish tradition: and its members indeed rode horses. Its leader had Herne’s trademark antlers, and although he was given two other names instead, Garanhir and Gorlassar, Herne’s was hidden inside the former. It is known as that of a completely unrelated character in the medieval Welsh story of Taliesin, but means ‘tall heron’, and a heron in archaic English is a herne. The Hunt was also associated in Garner’s story with a different cavalcade of mighty female spirits who ride the night, picking up another element in Grimm’s mixture. Garner’s Hunt was not, however, much interested in hunting, in the conventional sense of the term, but battle, echoing again the Einheriar, but also the war-loving spectres who incite conflict in medieval Irish sagas: and in a note to readers Garner indeed stated that he ‘had made the Herlathing Irish in manner and bloodiness’ (Garner 1974, 154). In physical appearance, its members were indeed copied from the heroes who feature in texts from medieval Ireland. There was,

moreover, another and very different framework of reference within which Garner set his action, and that was provided by the modern Pagan religion of Wicca, which had appeared only a little over ten years before he published the book. His female characters were linked to the phases of the moon, and represented between them Maiden, Mother and Crone, as does the goddess of Wicca, while the god of the latter is a horned or antlered one of wild nature, exuberantly embodied by Garner's Hunter (Hutton 1999). He also borrowed a different major motif from twentieth-century British 'alternative' spirituality, by having his Hunt ride along Old Straight Tracks of natural energy, spanning the land, of the kind first perceived by Alfred Watkins in the 1920s and subsequently forming the basis of the belief in ley lines.

Eight years passed before the Wild Hunt reappeared in a well-known book, but then it was taken up by another successful author of fantasy for the younger age-group, Penelope Lively. Her story, *The Wild Hunt of Hagworthy*, was set in one of the prime locations for nineteenth-century legends of ghostly huntsmen and hounds, the hills of West Somerset. Like Garner's, it embodied a common theme in fiction produced in modern societies emerging from Christian hegemony, a fear of what may happen if forces from a primeval pagan past, long lying dormant or imprisoned in the land, are set free once more. In Garner's vision the effects of this action were ultimately and unexpectedly beneficial, but in Lively's they were emphatically not. She made a village parson choose to revive the community's traditional Horn Dance, by youths carrying stags' antlers, in order to raise funds and promote tourism. This action awoke the local Wild Hunt, a group of spectral horsemen and hounds, the leader and his

horse both with antlered headdresses à la Herne, and the dogs black with flames coming from their mouths. The return of this, to ride by night, in turn revived in the village boys a primeval desire to hunt and kill one of their number as a sacrifice and scapegoat. Tragedy was averted at the conclusion, not by a reassertion of Christian powers (the representative of which, the vicar, was the unwitting cause of all the trouble, and worse than useless in solving it), but by the deployment of another kind of old magic, the use of an iron horseshoe to ward off evil. In case of any doubt, a well-informed character in the novel restated Grimm's construct of the Hunt in full, as objective truth: 'It comes originally from Scandinavian mythology- Odin is the huntsman.' (Lively 1971, 24).

After that, the Wild Hunt was clearly loose in the imagination of authors of juvenile fantasy literature, for the rest of the 1970s. In 1973 it was deployed again, with great literary and commercial success, by Susan Cooper. Her story, *The Dark is Rising*, was like Garner's about the embroilment of a human child as a protagonist in a cosmic war between good and evil, embodying figures from medieval and early modern mythologies and set in the modern English countryside. Its location was in the Thames Valley, near Windsor, and that provided an obvious invitation to bring in the Wild Hunt firmly and explicitly under the leadership of Herne. Goodness (characterized by Cooper as 'the Light') was represented as inherent in the land of Britain, and evil (the 'Dark') was portrayed as essentially a foreign and invading force. The enduring Satan-figure was the Black Rider, a superhuman strikingly reminiscent of Ainsworth's demonic Herne, without the antlers. Cooper's Herne was

by contrast essentially Garner's Hunter, an embodiment of 'the fierce inevitability of nature', with the same ruthlessness and capacity for cruelty (Cooper 1984, 341). He was inevitably antlered (at least on a headdress), but had in addition a beard, a mask and the eyes of a bird of prey, rendering his overall appearance unmistakably that of the famous Palaeolithic painting and carving usually called the 'Sorcerer' in the Trois-Freres cave in France: a power of the Old World indeed. He led a huge pack of hounds, white with red ears and eyes, in the now expected manner of those of Arawn, and rode a white mare, as prescribed by Robert Graves; and in a recent major study of the use of Celtic myth in fantasy literature for children, Dimitra Fimi has emphasized the general influence of Graves on Susan Cooper (Fimi 2017, 237-40). Cooper's Hunter routed the forces of the Dark and drove them out of the land, a feat repeated in a subsequent story by her in which he briefly reappeared to join other warriors of the Light in this enterprise (Cooper 1984, 775-6): like Garner's, he ended up on the right side.

By 1975 the Hunt had become familiar enough in the genre to have a walk-on (or ride-on) part, in a novel by Diana Wynne-Jones for the same kind of readership, as if it was becoming familiar enough to need inclusion without an accompanying necessity to make it pivotal. Indeed, its form was one which was now becoming canonical: the dogs (again white with red ears); the ambivalent moral character of the Hunt, as 'cruel and kind at once'; the antlered leader who emanates huge power and is associated with the inherent magic of the land; and his linkage with a medieval mythology, in this case that of Arawn, whose dogs these hounds represented. Wynne-



Jones, however, added a couple of unusual features, by giving her huntsman in addition the names of mythological hunters from ancient Greek myth, Orion and Actaeon, to make him span a variety of cultures, and by presenting him with a quarry, a large horned black beast which is killed each night and then resurrected for the next. This echoes one of the Continental versions of the ghostly huntsman, in which he forever pursues an otherworld creature (Wynne-Jones 1975, 173-80). Wynne-Jones was also unusual in giving the Hunt another appearance in a later book of hers, at the opening of the new century. It was also brief, but she took the opportunity to rework the image of the motif, into a cavalcade of human-like riders, about fifty strong, processing through the air over forests and mountains and led by 'Grandfather Gwyn', this being, of course, Rhys's and Graves's Gwyn ap Nudd (Wynne-Jones 2003, 136-42). Catherine Butler has noted a number of other borrowings from *The White Goddess* in both Lively's and Wynne-Jones's stories, such as the theme of the sacrifice associated with the Horn Dance in the former, and the parallel with the myth of Actaeon in the latter (Butler 2006, 190-93).

The rapid and tumultuous sequence of representations of the Wild Hunt in the '70s was closed off by Brian Hayles's *The Moon Stallion*, in 1978, in which it once more featured as a projection of the powers of wild nature. Once again, also, those powers looked very Wiccan, consisting of a moon goddess partnered with her consort, a god of the greenwood wearing a horned or antlered helmet. She was, however, here called Diana, the Roman goddess of the hunt but also a leader of the nocturnal female cavalcades described in the Middle Ages, or else Epona, after the ancient horse

goddess associated by some with the White Horse carved on the Berkshire Downs which was a focus of the action of the book. The god was Wayland, after the Saxon hero associated with the Neolithic long barrow standing near the White Horse, or just ‘the Green King’. The Hunt took the form of a storm cloud with riders in it, and functioned as a vehicle by which these deities destroyed offending mortals, who had sought to harness their old magic for selfish ends (Hayles 1978). With this the sudden and intense surge of interest in the motif by novelists came to an end, and – with the exception of the cameo appearance in the later book by Diana Wynne-Jones – it does not seem to have exercised much traction on British authors of fiction since. In the early 1980s, Herne was to achieve an even greater popular currency, in the television series *Robin of Sherwood* (Goldcrest Productions 1983-5), appearing as an antlered god of the greenwood. He did so, however, as a solitary figure operating on foot, having already shed his association with the Hunt. The latter seems to have continued as a prominent motif among American authors of fiction, but that is a different, and apparently extensive, area of study. In addition, during the 1970s heyday of the Hunt as a motif, authors occasionally incorporated the older motif of the solitary spectral huntsman pursuing sinners, without using the term ‘Wild Hunt’ for it: a dramatic example being Ronald Chetwynd-Hayes’ Welsh short story, from 1973, which has Arawn, as a giant rider in a black cloak followed by blood-red hounds, kill an English squire trying to rape a local girl and reembody him as one of Arawn’s pack (Chetwynd-Hayes 1973, 173-88).

In default of any explicit statements by the writers whose work is described above, it may be proposed that the frequency with which the Wild Hunt appeared in books of juvenile fantasy between 1971 and 1978 was generated by Garner's *The Moon of Gomrath*. This seems to have made it a potent image for the genre during a brief and vivid florescence, until familiarity sapped that potency in turn before the 1970s ran out. Its popularity, and easy acceptance, among folklorists during the same years is harder to explain, not least because, once again, none of the scholars concerned attempted to account for it. In part the frequent appearance of it in that decade may be ascribed to a practical development – the appearance of the Batsford series of books on county folklore aimed at a general readership - but it may fairly be asked why the Hunt featured frequently in those as an accepted term, not requiring any explanation, when it had not done so in the earlier generation of local studies. Its prominence in both fiction and non-fiction during the '70s may perhaps best be accounted for, imprecisely, by suggesting that one reinforced the other, so that the same idea bobbed around British culture at the time, or at least that part of British culture which was concerned with folkloric motifs. It therefore readily found a home in different kinds of work which fed off that interest.

## ***Conclusion***

In many respects, the cultural history of the Wild Hunt in modern Britain reflects a much wider pattern, whereby key nineteenth-century ideas achieved a final notable

lease of life in the mid to late twentieth century: the idea of a universal prehistoric Great Goddess; the belief that ancient pagan rites lay behind most modern folk customs; the desire to identify earlier pagan deities behind figures in medieval creative literature; and the concept of the Celts as a distinct ancient race of peoples with enduring physical and emotional characteristics, are other examples. In the case of the Hunt, however, the model that Jacob Grimm developed seems to retain some residual vitality among British scholars, at least as a convenient label for a category of phenomena, even if it does not seem to feature much now as a subject for British folklore studies in its own right.

This article has attempted to show the context in which Grimm's model was received in Britain, of a pre-existing interest in ghostly huntsmen associated with what seems to be a widespread popular tradition of nocturnal hunts by phantom hounds. None the less, the previous history of this tradition seems hard to substantiate, and it was certainly supercharged in the British literary world by the importation of German folk tales before Grimm made his impact. Moreover, there seems to be little sustained evidence in Britain of the nocturnal journeys by female spirits or the processions of the penitent or demonic dead, which were prominent in medieval and early modern popular belief on the European continent and were major components of Grimm's construct of the Hunt. That construct itself had an uneven impact on British writers in the first hundred years after Grimm produced it. It was influential among folklorists interested in German and Scandinavian material, and general theories of the origins of popular belief, and also among a few concerned with local material. In general,

however, it was ignored by the majority of county folklore collections in the period in which most of them were assembled, and had even less influence on creative authors, with the single rapid and tremendous exception of Harrison Ainsworth.

Among both groups in Britain, however, it enjoyed a brief but intense period of interest in the 1960s and 1970s, during which it reached its apogee of influence; and this has left a lingering, and occasional, employment of it among folklorists, in the terms and with the associations which were accorded to it in that period, into the present century. Its penumbra of emotional attachments during that late flowering demonstrates much of the reason for its potency at that time; for it plugged into three of the major cultural currents of the age. One was an anxious relationship with the natural world, and especially that of the changing English countryside, which was viewed as an entity charged with ancient and wild power, at once exhilarating and inspiring, and alien and menacing. Another was the increasing importance of fantasy as a genre of popular fiction-writing, and especially of that designed for children and young adults. Figures and motifs from medieval romances and wonder-tales, and from native and foreign folklore, provided rich source material for that, especially with the interpretations and mental linkages provided for them by the scholars who had edited, collected and commented on them over the previous two hundred years. The third current consisted of the secularization of British society which occurred during the late twentieth century, commencing most evidently in the 1960s, and producing two very different reactions which both manifested in creative writing about the Wild Hunt. The first was a sense of satisfaction and excitement in the notion that ancient

pagan deities had lingered in the British countryside disguised in folkloric forms. This seemed to testify to the enduring resilience and stability of rural Britain, and its ability to transcend and survive change with its essence intact. The other was a fear of primeval and barbaric horrors which might be set loose if a new interest in pagan antiquity succeeded in reawakening and reviving the primordial powers which pagans had venerated and which had been safely suppressed during the intervening Christian centuries.

The rapid cessation of interest in the motif of the Wild Hunt among British writers may be ascribed simply to the rise and fall of a literary fashion, which had swept up authors for a time and then left them, and their successors, with little new to say. It might, however, be due also to the ebbing of the hopes and anxieties, contingent on late modernity, which had been bound up with the employment of the motif. Time may show which of these suggestions is more true, and whether the motif is fated to enjoy another lease of life among the British.

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